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Legal Aid Gets \$7 Million on its 50th

Joseph Barrios

On a day it celebrated 50 years of giving free legal advice, Southern Arizona Legal Aid announced it has received two grants totaling more than \$7 million.

One of the grants includes the creation of a Web site with legal advice for the poor.

A three-year grant worth \$6.6 million and a separate technology grant were announced at a press conference and dinner held Thursday at Evo. A. DeConcini Federal Courthouse, 405 W. Congress St. Deconcini was one of the organization's early board members.

Thursday's celebration was the first public even held at the courthouse. About 100 members of the legal community attended, including state Attorney General Janet Napolitano and Arizona Supreme Court Justice Thomas Zlaket.

Both grants come from the Legal Services., a private, nonprofit corporation established by Congress in 1974 to offer poor people equal access to the justice system. It's funded through congressional appropriation.

The \$6.6 million grant will pay for staffing operations. The Web site, which will be created with a \$50,000 grant, is intended to offer legal advice to poor people across Arizona, said Paul Julian, chief executive officer of Southern Arizona Legal Aid. He said he wants every poor person in Arizona to have legal help.

"This is another step in trying to realize that. We feel like we do a pretty good job of helping people who find us," Julian said.

Julian said that though most people do not own computers, they can still access them at libraries, schools, and courthouses. He said the Web site will help bridge the "digital divide" that keeps the poor from using the Internet as a resource.

Southern Arizona Legal Aid was founded in 1951 as the Legal Aid Society of the Pima County Bar Association. It offered free legal advice on civil matters including disputes in small claims court, divorce proceedings and obtaining Social Security benefits.

Charles Ares, a member of the board of directors in the 1950s, said the office was kind of a charity operation. . . . a bare bones operation" in the early years.

Today, staffers and volunteer attorneys help more than 12,000 people every year. The organization has 10 offices in nine counties.

The group runs a toll free Elder Hotline for people 60 and older. The group has received national acclaim for advocating American Indian causes and efforts to protect battered immigrant women. Both staffers and volunteer lawyers work in city, county, tribal, state and federal courts across the state.

Organizers said the anniversary is particularly sweet because the office has survived federal funding crises while similar organizations have not. In 1995 Congress cut a third of funding to Legal Services Corp., which caused Southern Arizona Legal Aid to lose roughly a quarter of its \$4 million operating budget.